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Abstract (Developmental Paper)

For

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Authentic following from a relational perspective: explorations of followers' experiences within the UK public sector

Summary (150 words)

Authenticity has had presence within the organisational literature since the early 1900s (Erickson, 1995), although there has been a notable transformation in the way it is understood. The concept originated as an individual-based phenomena (see Harter, 2002; Ferrara, 1994; Kernis, 2003), discussed as a trait and in application to leaders. However, recent interpretations often encompass others; in the case of leadership, theoretical models have begun to acknowledge followers. However, this has often been a periphery addition, with a lack of focus being given to followers, and insufficient challenges to the many assumptions made. This paper intends to progress understandings of authenticity as a relational process, as attempted by contemporary authors such as Gardner *et al* (2011) and Avolio & Gardner (2005). This paper will further explore follower's experiences of following and the extent to which they perceive authentic relationships to be present, both vertically and horizontally encompassing leaders and co-followers.

Track: Leadership and Leadership Development

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Authentic following from a relational perspective: explorations of followers' experiences within the UK public sector

Introduction

Authenticity is a popular concept currently being applied to the leadership, and albeit rarely, the followership literature. It is commonly discussed as a trait or characteristic which individuals, and in particular leaders and their followers, should aspire to possess. However, this paper proposes to consider authenticity as a relational process, exploring followers' experiences and understandings of this in their relations with others. To do so a relational social constructionist perspective is adopted.

The concept of authenticity and its transformation over recent years will be reviewed, before considering authenticity and following as relational processes. The methodology and methods for this research will then be discussed and justified, before providing an outline of the future development of this paper.

Authenticity and the Authentic Relationship

In such challenging times within the business environment, authenticity has returned as a key "construct" (Endrissat *et al*, 2007. p. 207) that we look for in individuals that we engage with (Gardner *et al*, 2011; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Cooper *et al*, 2005), in multiple contexts but in particular in our professional lives. The use of the term *construct* has significance for the paper, reflecting a relational perspective. This opposes much of the literature that adopts an entity perspective, habitually describing authenticity as a *trait* or *characteristic*. This will be discussed further throughout the paper.

Whilst authenticity may have Greek origins (Trilling, 1972), we have seen a transformation in the way that we understand this concept, arguably in alignment with the movements in society for instance from modernism to postmodernism. To illustrate this, early understandings described authenticity as a self referential concept (see Harter, 2002) referring to personal morals and values (Parke & Wormell, 1956; Ferrara, 1994; Sparrowe, 2005). However, more recent explanations of this concept have begun to consider it in social terms as well (Kernis, 2003; Woods, 2007; Endrissat *et al*, 2007). Ferrara's (1994) contribution denotes this transition, with authenticity conceived as "One's genuine moral judgement about the value of the conflicting goals that are pursued individually and collectively" (p. 67). This emphasises the importance of the self in relation to others, and reflects the belief that we do not exist in isolation. Therefore, unless we consider our relations with others, our understandings are meaningless (Burr, 2003). Conversely, contemporary literature does encompass others into understandings of authenticity, for instance "a quality that others must attribute to you" (Goffee & Jones, 2005; p.1). However, this continues to convey authenticity as an attribute possessed by individuals rather than an aspect of a relational process. This relational notion has since been explored in Gardner *et al's* (2005; 2011) work, which has influenced and informed the authors development of this paper, as well as in Eagly's (2005). Despite their relational perspectives enabling both followers and leaders to be considered, they remain largely centred on the latter in terms of their overall research focus and methods, for instance by interviewing managers only (Eagly, 2005).

Following and Leading as Relational Processes

The leadership literature has somewhat cast a shadow over followers, in terms of the research conducted, models proposed, and even concepts utilised. For instance, despite some attempts to take a more mutual approach to studying leaders and followers (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Spitzmuller & Ilies, 2010; Rost, 1995) their concepts lacked follower recognition, e.g. relational *leadership* (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Meindl (1995) proposed for all attention to be redirected away from leaders on to followers, but this has not been achieved. The author recognises the significant power imbalance between these two parties both in practice and in the literature itself (Martinez *et al*, 2012; Collinson, 2005), however does believe that such an extreme approach would be valuable.

As many argue it is difficult to understand followership in isolation (Kellerman, 2007; Baker, 2007; Srinivasan & Holsinger, 2012), when to be a follower there must be someone to follow. This is further reflected in the relational social constructionist epistemology, with the notion that we do not exist as separate entities in society (Burr, 2003). Therefore we cannot understand or experience followers in isolation when there are many local-cultural factors surrounding them (McNamee & Hosking, 2012). It is for this purpose that this paper focuses upon followers and their relational experiences of authenticity; not only recognising following (Carsten *et al*, 2010), but also authenticity as a relational process, by drawing upon Gardner *et al*'s (2011) model.

Authentic Following

Whilst there is literature that acknowledges the possibility of authentic followers/followership (such as Ilies *et al*, 2005; Gardner *et al* 2005 & 2011; Ford & Harding, 2011; Woolley *et al*, 2011), it is rarely centred on followership and is typically conceptually based. Despite these papers offering their perspectives on authentic followership, many have lacked critique of the concept and of previous models on which they draw, and have not progressed this to empirical research in the field. To date the majority of studies that have included an aspect of the follower when looking at authenticity have had positivist perspectives (see Leroy *et al*, 2012), thereby utilising questionnaires and measurable scales to identify themes. Whilst the social constructionist approach does not discount any methodologies (McNamee & Hosking, 2012), such methods fail to gain understandings of followers' experiences and perspectives which may prove insightful and a more effective way to give *voice* to this marginalised group.

In recent years, studies on authentic leadership (such as Gardner *et al*, 2005; Ilies *et al*, 2005; Woolley *et al*, 2011) have begun to acknowledge followers in the models that are proposed. Nevertheless, they remain largely focused on the leader e.g. how *leaders* influence followers, how authentic *leaders* may develop more authentic followers. Patterson (2010) highlights this focus, stating that recent studies have ignored authentic leadership as a social process. Gardner *et al*'s (2005) model can be criticised for neglecting the idea that followers may influence the development of authentic leadership (Ford & Harding, 2011). However, Gardner *et al* (2011) later reflect and recognise this limitation, and call for further research on the followers' role in the formation of authentic relationships. What is significant here is that Gardner *et al* (2011) have not just adapted their research to include followers, through minor adjustments to the focus (e.g. calling for further research on how followers develop), instead they have acknowledged that authenticity should be considered as a relational process, within the context of leadership and followership. Kean *et al* (2011) extend this distinction, with their terms 'follower-centric' and 'follower-focus' when describing research in this field.

“Follower-centric...includes the individual’s and group’s social construction of leadership...follower-focus drawing on the social construction of followers on doing following and followership” (Kean *et al*, 2011. pp. 509-510)

A recent study by Leroy *et al* (2012) looked at authentic followership alongside authentic leadership, and applied this to performance and motivational theories. Whilst this study included a significant proportion of followers in their study, it was quantitative-based research and so failed to develop deep understandings of followers’ experiences and perspectives on authenticity. Furthermore, despite their focus upon followers from the outset, they later reveal that their motivation to consider followers in more detail was to understand what effects authentic leaders have had on them. This is arguably a more follower-centric study (Kean *et al*, 2011). Again, we are seeing followers being incorporated into studies as periphery elements only. This paper proposes a follower-focused approach to understanding authentic followership and, as indicated by Kean *et al*’s (2011) descriptions above, a social constructionist approach will be most appropriate to explore authentic following, what it means and how it is experienced by followers themselves.

Methodology and Methods

The paper has a relational social constructionist philosophical perspective, adopting beliefs outlined in social constructionism and applying a relational ontology. We construct meanings of phenomena by combining our personal perceptions with perceptions offered by those we are exposed to within our societal relations, both past and present (Crotty, 1998; Burr, 2003). The notion of “being-in-relation-to-others” (Cunliffe & Erikson, 2011. pp. 1430) reflects the relational nature of the paper, from our conceptual understandings of authenticity and following, to the actual methods selected for data collection. Authenticity is determined by ourselves and others around us, and we cannot follow in isolation (Kellerman, 2007; Baker, 2007; Srinivasan & Holsinger, 2012); there must be another party involved in this process, most typically the leader within an organisational context. It is for this purpose that this philosophical approach is deemed appropriate.

An exploratory qualitative methodology will be adopted, with individual case studies of followers in UK Public Sector organisations. This is considered an apt approach due to the lack of current qualitative empirical research in this particular area (Cooper *et al*, 2005), allowing the author to explore the field and gather meaningful data regarding individual’s experiences as opposed to applying previously proposed models to highlight contextual differences.

The data collection methods utilised will be semi-structured interviews with twenty followers. The interview itself is a relational process (King & Horrocks, 2010; King, 2004). The author acknowledges that following and leading are often interchangeable and that some participants will likely enact and experience both processes within their roles. However due to the focus upon following within this study, participants selected will not be in a senior management position. In addition to this, they will have worked within the public sector for a minimum of five years, to enable adequate reflection upon their experiences within the public sector. The participants will take part in a first interview (exploring understandings of following and authenticity) and will then be asked to maintain a research diary for approximately 4-6 weeks, where they will reflect upon their experiences of following and the notion of authenticity within their relationships with co-followers and leaders. The diaries will incorporate images that pre-exist and have struck the participants or that they have taken or produced. They will then take part in a second follow-up interview, where areas that came

up in the first interview and in the research diary will be explored. Elements such as storytelling and photo elicitation will be utilised within the interviews, to prompt discussions and to encourage participants to draw upon personal experiences that they have had in relation to the phenomena being discussed. Again, this reflects the philosophical positioning of the paper and indeed the author, with meaning being constructed from the lived experiences and interactions with others (McNamee & Hosking, 2012).

The collected data will be analysed using discourse analysis (King & Horrocks, 2010). Whilst there will be several research participants within the sample, this research does not intend to form generalisations. Through data collection and subsequent analysis, it is hoped that insights into the followers' experiences of following and their understandings of authentic relations will be achieved. The researcher also hopes to explore the power discourses that shape followers understandings and experiences of authentic following.

Further Development of the Paper

The submission of this paper denotes a key developmental process as part of the author's PhD. It will allow key ideas of the thesis to be shared, and help to ensure that these can be articulated in an effective way to a varied audience in terms of specialism and research backgrounds. The submission of this paper has occurred prior to data collection and thus also data analysis. However the final version of the paper will include details of the pilot interviews as well as analysed data from the set of 1st interviews with participants. Feedback received on the paper at the conference will therefore add value before embarking on the set of 2nd/follow up interviews. When concluding the final version of the paper, the next stages of the study will be outlined, reflecting changes that may occur or have become incurred during the PhD process.

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